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ABSTRACT

The "writing workshop" approach to teaching creative writing, virtually unchallenged throughout the United States, has recently come under fire. Two schools of thought, while agreeing that the traditional workshop needs a thorough overhaul, differ in approaches to that overhaul. One approach, using the theories of Harold Bloom, argues that since creative writing students, consciously or unconsciously, use models as a basis for their work, teachers need to provide literary models for students to read and imitate, so that they may begin to understand the tradition they wish to join. The other approach, based on feminist pedagogy, asserts that the creative writing workshop, as it is now used, is actually incompatible with feminist theory, as it is patriarchal and authoritative--the teacher's notions of "good writing" become standards for "safe writing" to which the students try to adhere as they follow the model of their teacher. One suggestion to remedy the problems of the "workshop approach" is to transfer authority from the teacher to the students. (PRA)

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The Father Speaks, the Mother Talks Back: Revisionist, Rebellious Models for the Creative Writing Classroom

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Ever since the Iowa Writers Workshop established the pattern of teacher directed "workshopping" of student writing, other creative writing programs have been quick to implement this formula, or model, for teaching students how to write fiction and poetry. In the writing workshop, students write a draft of their work, make copies of it, distribute the copies to the workshop, and then ask other students to praise or criticize the draft for revising purposes. For many years this form of teaching has

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continued, virtually unchallenged throughout the country. Most of us teach creative writing via the workshop because that's how we ourselves were taught how to write. It's hard to question a system that has, at least superficially, worked well for decades, and has been enjoyable for students and relatively easy for the teacher.

Many teachers of creative writing believe there is nothing wrong with the workshop approach. In its defense, they point to the rapid growth of creative writing in the university over the past 20 years. They quote the sentiment of Richard Hugo, who wrote: "The creative writing workshop may be the last place where anyone cares about your life." They display bookshelves filled with books written by workshop graduates. But what we might discover if we examined these workshop products is that the writings are remarkably homogenous, almost to the point of being indistinct.

This is especially troubling considering that we are now entering an academic era that supposedly fosters diversity and encourages celebrations of difference. As Don Bogan remarks, "If our goal is to produce 'workshop' poems and stories--well-polished, cautious, and largely indistinguishable--then it's fine to consider only student work [in the workshop]. The students will learn from each other's errors, revising, avoiding the problems . . . until eventually they have evolved a product that makes few mistakes."

For this reason, and others, the workshop has recently come under fire. The spark may have been Donald Hall's 1987 article in the AWP CHRONICLE entitled "Poetry and Ambition," which chastised creative writing workshops across the country for teaching students to write what he labeled the "McPoem." Like Bogan, Hall argues that the McPoem is being mass-produced in university writing workshops. He claims we promote democratic mediocrity by allowing our students, who are novice writers, many with poor backgrounds in literature, to recognize and define "quality writing" in their own work and the work of their peers. Hall writes, "To produce the McPoem, institutions must enforce patterns, institutions within institutions, all subject to the same glorious dominance of unconscious economic determinism, template and formula of consumerism. The McPoem is the product of the workshops of Hamburger University." While the writing workshop supposedly brings beginning writers together to share new ideas and work, it usually ends up as a creative writing hospital, where terminally ill poems are bandaged and put back on the street. We teach our students the "craft" of writing, without discussing the "art": hence we produce very competent craftsmen rather than artists.

So how do we break away from the workshop model to develop a new pedagogy that will offer our students greater opportunities for creative freedom? Perhaps we should take our cue from those who develop composition pedagogy. Like them, we should realize that by studying modern critical

theory we may learn how to re-shape our teaching methods by using new models. These new models should be consistent with the new ways we look at at the relationship between reader, writer, and text. Indeed, a multiplicity of approaches to teaching creative writing will become apparent as we study a multiplicity of theories as divergent as Harold Bloom and feminism, two schools of thinking that we would like to discuss today. I will discuss a "Bloomian" approach; Julie will discuss a feminist approach.

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Yes, there are problems with the implementation of the workshop model in the creative writing classroom. In theory, the workshop would seem to follow certain tenets of feminist pedagogy. In theory, the workshop is student-centered, rather than teacher-centered. The ideal workshop focuses on the process of writing--students share various drafts of work in progress--rather than on finished products. In the perfect workshop, students assume responsibility for their own learning and are empowered by discoveries and achievements. Yet the reality of the workshop all too frequently enacts the problems of patriarchal society. The teacher assumes the role of mentor; the students become disciples. Two or three talented students rise to the top in status and authority while other, less experienced writers become silenced and are unable to participate. The reality

is that the workshop all too often becomes an exercise in Follow the Leader or Father Knows Best.

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Harold Bloom, in his excellent book, POETRY AND REPRESSION, states ". . . poetry always lives under the shadow of poetry. The caveman who traced the outline of an animal upon a rock always retraced a precursor's outline." The same can be said of creative writing students--consciously or unconsciously, they use models as the basis of their work. Their writing process involves re-vising or re-writing what they have read in the past. In THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE, Bloom lables this process of imitation "misreading" or "misprision." He writes that misreading ". . . appears as a corrective movement in a poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction the new poem swerves." Bloom argues that misprision, or poetic influence, is a perfectly natural process that all poets go through when writing.

If we are to believe Bloom, and I do, then we have a problem in the creative writing classroom since most of the students know little about the genre in which they are working. Let's take a beginning poetry writing class as an example. The typical student there has had one or no literature classes and knows very little about poetry. At

the beginning of the semester when I ask my students who their favorite poets are, most of the students admit they don't have one. And the responses I do get are likely to be Helen Steiner Rice, or a few rock stars such as Robert Smith of the Cure. Of course one or two will name Shakespeare or Frost or Plath, but these are rare and happy exceptions.

If one envisions the poetry workshop (and some workshop leaders do) as a merely a forum for students to express their feelings, then there is no reason for them to read poetry. They can simply write their poems based on the models they already know: hence, their poems will be the descendents of Top 40 songs, sentimental posters, and greeting cards. We cannot blame these students then if their writing is overly sentimental, vague, overwritten. Nor can we blame them for writing poems about snowflakes, fall, favorite pets, or a dead grandparent. They are just doing what comes naturally--that is to base their poems on the models that they have previously encountered.

Most students in creative writing classes express a desire to write "literary" poetry and fiction; therefore, we need to provide literary models for our students to read and imitate, so they may begin to understand the tradition they wish to join. This way, their poems will be misreadings or revisions of excellent literature, and their work will be more ambitious, more challenging, and ultimately more satisfying. Donald Hall writes, "We look daily at the great monuments of old accomplishment and we desire to add to their

number, to make poems in homage to poems. Old poems that we continue to read and love become the standard we try to live up to. These old poems become our Muse, our encouragement to song and our discouragement of comparison. Therefore it is essential for all poets, all the time, to read and reread the great ones."

There are several ways to switch the emphasis of the creative writing class from workshopping to reading. Today, however, I'm going to advocate one method in particular--one in which about 75% of the class time would be spent discussing literature. In a beginning poetry class, we would read and analyze four poets in depth--let's say John Donne, Wallace Stevens, Sharon Olds, and Ai. But we wouldn't read and comment on these poets as literary critics, instead we would read as writers. We wouldn't be too concerned with meaning or looking up literary allusions--our interest would be in figuring out how the poets create the effects they do. As Don Bogan writes, "If literature classes help students discover what's there in a text, the focus in a creative writing class is on how it got there. To read like a writer is to look not for patterns but for strategies, not for achievements but challenges, not for the product but the writing process behind it."

This literary approach to creative writing has several significant advantages over the traditional workshop approach. The first and foremost of these is the fact that the students become familiar with poetry--they acquire the

models they need to begin writing. Instead of spending a three hour workshop trying to repair broken student poems by changing a few words or line break here and there, or even worse, saying that we like this poem and dislike that one, now we can spend most of our time looking at how poems are made. By reading, students will see how their predecessors have handled the same problems they now face--this knowledge will help them as they create their own works.

A second advantage to a literature-based creative writing class is that it promotes diversity. In a traditional workshop, students often end up learning how to write indistinguishable McPoems that the members of the workshop will label "good" because they have no technical flaws and don't challenge anyone politically or intellectually. By bringing in several different poets as models, beginning writers will not set the standards of what is good and bad; instead, throughout the semester, they will discover that there are many excellent ways to approach writing a poem, some of which may be more appealing to them than others.

A final advantage to a literature-based creative writing class is that students learn to read. To become successful writers, students must have a love for the genre in which they write. A poet is not made in a creative writing class during a group critique--he or she is made "by applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair." For anyone who is seriously interested in writing, this application must be

two-fold--they must invest a considerable amount of time both reading and writing.

During this past fall semester, I used a literature-based approach to teaching creative writing, where the students read four books of poetry and wrote ten imitations and five of their own poems. While not everything written that semester was ready for the Norton Anthology, the results were very encouraging. There were fewer sappy poems and fewer chopped up sentences that claimed to be free verse. On the whole, the poems were more intelligent, gutsy, imagistic, and musical--in essence, more like poetry.

Several of the imitations were very impressive: one man, after reading Blake's "The Chimneysweeper," wrote a poem about a young drug courrier who worked at a crack house. The poem in many ways was remarkable because it showed a wide range of emotions for the young drug runner--in previous classes I had read several poems about the evils of inner city drug life, written by white students who condemned with little attempt to understand. The author of this poem clearly learned something from Blake about how to consider another's perspective. Another student wrote an excellent imitation of Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gently into That Good Night," where the woman urged the doctors to pull the plug on her comatose grandmother. While her poem was not quite a villanelle, it effectively used repetition and had much of the force of Thomas' language. The poems written by the students after the imitation period were not Blakian or

Dylanesque, but were good student poems informed by the knowledge of theme, structure, and poetics they had gained by reading.

* * *

The creative writing workshop, as it is now used, is incompatible with feminist theory: the workshop is patriarchal and authoritative. As Carol Nicholson points out about traditional teaching methods, they "tend to reinforce the single authoritative point of view of the teacher and the notion that there is one correct answer to each question" (201). Similarly, in the workshops I've witnessed, the teacher's notions about "good writing" become standards for "safe writing" that the students try to adhere to. Students are afraid to take risks in their writing because student critics, following the model of their teacher, will zero in on any aberration from minimalism, realism, or whatever the current period style is. The writer is told "this doesn't ring true," if her truth is different from the truth of Raymond Carver or Ann Beattie. The workshop model works on the assumption that all students are alike, and that they are all interested in writing the same kinds of stories or poems. As Jonathan Holden points out, the workshop fails because it "trains students to master, exactly, the period style of the moment."

While students are assumed to be homogenous, it is also

assumed that each student will strive to become the best--to score the most assenting nods from the teacher and her disciples--even at the expense of others. Typical assignments and grading policies do not encourage students to experience knowledge as a collective effort (Nicholson 201). "Objective" knowledge about esthetics is valued over "experiential"--a student critique of another's point of view or use of figurative language is valorized over a student's exuberant "I loved your story, that happened to me once!" The students with greater objective knowledge then gain a measure of power over the other students, often silencing them.

Finally, student writing is evaluated in the workshop against the traditional notions of "quality writing": realism is valued over science fiction or fantasy, minimalist writing scores higher than flowery prose, and so on. The teacher becomes a judge, valorizing one form over another, "imposing a hierarchy of learned aesthetic values, gathered from ideal texts, upon the student texts" (Caywood and Overing xii). This results in a student's viewing her own work as an inferior product, alien from herself and her own experience.

Numerous alternatives are now being proposed by feminists who would seek to change the existing educational structure. I disagree with Kristeva's position that feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists--that we may only say "that's not it." I agree instead with Nicholson, who believes that feminism is moving

from a "language of critique" to a "language of possibility" that will form the basis of a new radical pedagogy. For example, many feminist teachers are implementing teaching strategies that transfer the authority from the teacher to the students. I have used these techniques in the creative writing classroom with great success.

Sometimes I ask a student to lead the group in discussion--I sit in the back and take notes. Sometimes I have students look at each other's work in small groups of three or four--I leave the room. Each quarter I have students write a collaborative story. Students keep journals, too, recording not only their drafts in progress but also critiques of their own writing and assigned readings. Students devise their own independent reading projects, where they choose an author to read and share favorite stories or interviews with the class. I have students give presentations on some aspect of writing that they will study in the library. Sometimes students give readings or invite local writers they would like to have read for our class. In short, these strategies all give students more authority over their own learning and allow them to develop their writing independent of an imposed "mob" esthetics.

Many feminists believe that the goals and dynamics of such a classroom are "to encourage nonhierarchal, mutually supportive, and empowering modes of thought and behavior" (Gardner et al 64). That isn't to say that the teacher

becomes invisible. As Gardner points out, it is often necessary for the teacher to facilitate such activities, to intervene without taking control, if only to encourage silenced students to speak out.

In addition to transferring authority, the other advantage of these student-oriented strategies is that they accommodate difference in the classroom to a greater extent than traditional workshop procedures. "A contemporary challenge to women's studies, as well as to the feminist movement, is to recognize and appreciate the diversity of women's experience" (Gardner et al 64) and the diversity of their writing. Caywood and Overing discuss this pedagogical concept in terms of equity:

> Equity, as we understand it, creates new standards which accommodate and nurture differences. Equity fosters the individual voice in the classroom, investing students with confidence in their own authority. (3)

In other words, equity recognizes the power and creative potential of heterogeneity. Learning occurs in the web of shared experience.

* * *

While I am quite sympathetic to many of the aims and practices of feminists, I cannot see how this feminist approach to creative writing is going to improve student

writers. I believe that in a university we should be challenging our students to learn and think about new ideas, not just rehashing what they already do know in overly-sensitive sessions where nothing useful is accomplished. I'm for a de-centered classroom, where students take responsibility for their own learning and where they have a strong voice. But what I see happening in Julie's feminist creative writing class is even worse than what happens in a traditional writing workshop. Her students will not only lack literary exemplars on which to base their poems, they will also lose out on a strong workshop leader, who may well be the only one in the room who knows anything about the subject that is supposedly being taught. And while learning poetry through imitation may be labeled "patriarchal," this structure is necessary, if only for a time, until the students gain enough strength to kill their Oedipal fathers.

* * *

Although we both think it's time the traditional workshop received a thorough overhaul, we differ in the approaches to that overhaul. Perhaps this is because we see different purposes for the creative writing class. Perhaps we even see different purposes for the act of writing itself. I view writing first of all as an act of self-expression that leads to self-discovery. Secondly, I view writing as an act of communication. Finally, I view writing as an art form.

Most undergraduate students at Youngstown State University aren't interested in being in the Norton Anthology--not yet anyway. Instead, they are tentatively recording the very things that make them human--even if that includes fall, a pet, or the loss of a grandparent. Beginning writers should be exposed to the writings of others, yes, but I prefer to give them a dittoed reader (less formidable) that includes not only Thomas, Blake, and Ai, but also works of mine, of other local writers who may visit our class, and of other students in past classes. This anthology is less threatening than Norton's, I hope; it is less exclusive, and perhaps more inspiring. Each quarter, we also create our own class anthology that is copied and distributed among us--it is a wealth of self-expression, communication, and, in some places, art.

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